

GOETHE MEDAL 2013

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

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- Check against delivery -

"...He levels the way of words with discretion and sensitivity and enables cultural and personal encounters ... with enthusiasm for the German language... according to the conferment commission."

Soon half a century and still no peaceful coexistence? "With enthusiasm", "words", "encounters"?

After successful school graduation and an unsuccessful attempt to study architecture and economics in Iran, my father asked me, "Why don't you go to Germany?" My first misgiving was not, "why Germany?" but "how can I learn chemistry in German?"

That was my first encounter, my first confrontation with a language entirely unknown to me at the time, a language that – thanks to countless Hollywood films – many believed and still think consists of one single word: *Achtung*.

My approach to the German language began with a teacher who studied in Germany during the First World War and, after a few lessons using the standard textbook of the times, *Deutsche Sprachlehre für Ausländer*, could not answer the question, why do they shoot rockets at them and not the moon?

That was my first and last German course, but my second encounter: Odd, an engineer, studied in Germany, cannot answer a beginner's question?
Is the language that complicated?

In the aftermath, I attempted to teach myself the language. My favourite leisure activity was, even then, reading. My first stop after Tehran was Graz in Austria. During a brief stay in this city I purchased, quite by coincidence, a novel. "Was it really a coincidence?" I later often asked myself.

It was exactly 47 years ago and yet I can still remember the novel's cover and its plot very clearly: *Ein gewisser Herr Y* by Barbara Noack.

Later, I never attempted to discover whether she was a well known or unknown, a good or a bad writer. I was too busy in the experience: Did I – with my then, very modest German skills – understanding everything, and understand it correctly?

Was it really a melancholic love story in GERMAN?
Or did my eastern way of seeing and thinking alter the language and the plot? It is a question that I often grappled with even years later.

That was my third encounter, my third confrontation with the German language, this time linked with a misgiving. Uncanny.

More uncanny encounters were to follow. The misgivings grew. Was this complicated "Achtung language" truly as gentle, poetic, meaningful as I felt it was?
Do I perhaps not understand it?

And why this respectful enthusiasm for it?

It was like a battle, a wrestling match between us, the German language and me, between me and these uncanny encounters.

Later, this fear of confrontations, of this wrestling match and – perhaps – not winning it, accompanied me to all of the classrooms of the universities, for many years.

I had to seek out an escape route, or a way to a peaceful, understanding coexistence with this language.

Intensive preoccupation!

Goethe, Rilke, Thomas Mann, Brecht, Dürrenmatt, Böll, Lenz; later : Timm, Schulze, Stamm, Herrmann and ...

*„Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch ...“*

„Nun ist der Herbst da, und der Sommer wird nicht zurückkehren, niemals werde ich ihn wiedersehen ...“

*„Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehen der Stäbe
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt ...“*

„Genau betrachtet, lebte meine Großmutter hintereinander zwei Leben. Das eine, erste, als Tochter, als Frau und als Mutter und das zweite einfach als Frau B., eine alleinstehende Person ohne Verpflichtungen und mit bescheidenen, aber ausreichenden Mitteln. Das erste Leben dauerte etwa sechs Jahrzehnte, das zweite nicht mehr als zwei Jahre...“

„in der Heimat meines Großvaters lebten die meisten Menschen von der Arbeit in den Flachsbrechen. Seit fünf Generationen atmeten sie den Staub ein, der den zerbrochenen Stengeln entsteigt, ließen sich langsam dahinmorden ...“

„Im Süden brannte das Gras. Es brannte schnell und fast rauchlos, es brannte gegen die Berge hin, gegen die Keniaberge ...“

„Noch am selben Abend ging Bärlach zu seinem Arzt am Bärenplatz, Doktor Hungertobel. Die Lichter brannten schon, von Minute zu Minute brach eine immer finstere Nacht herein ...“

„Es ist die einzige Erinnerung an den 16 Jahre älteren Bruder, der einige Monate später, Ende September, in der Ukraine schwer verwundet wurde ...“

„sie kamen in der Nacht vom 20. auf den 21. Juli, zwischen zwölf und halb eins. Viele werden es nicht gewesen sein ...“

„Agnes ist tot. Eine Geschichte hat sie getötet. Nichts ist von ihr geblieben als diese Geschichte...“

„Aber Micha starb nicht. Nicht in der Nacht vom Montag zum Dienstag, auch nicht in der Nacht vom Dienstag zum Mittwoch, möglicherweise würde er am Mittwochabend sterben, oder in der Nacht zum Donnerstag ...“

I translated all of it and much more. Enthusiastic, respectful, but every time a renewed confrontation, an uncanny encounter.

Enthusiasm, confrontations and misgivings later confronted me with the question: What about MY language? Have I lost it? Have I only been a quick-change artist? Has German altered my Farsi, or has Farsi informed my German?

I began writing: stories, a novel, plays, essays.

Here, too, fear and misgivings accompanied me: Why do I write? Is it a self-assertion towards “German?” Is it personal protection? Or a means of approach?

Ladies and Gentlemen, if I had my way, I would prefer to mention each and every one of you by name and thank you personally. Since that is not possible I thank you all very much for being here today.

My heart-felt thanks to Professor Lehmann, Professor von Braun, the members of the Goethe Medal conferment committee and Dr Lerch.

It was a long task of preparation for today, many contributed and the entire time I was a burden to three always helpful, very friendly ladies: Christiane Jekeli, Sabine Willig, Eva Schrot. Thank you very much.

My friends have a long way to Weimar behind them, some a very long way. A wonderful sign of friendship. My special thanks go to:

Maryam Palizban and Thomas Engel, Maryam Kohansal and Kaveh Fouladi Nassab, and Tess Lewis and Donal McLaughlin.

I would like to thank my family, Mahboubeh, Tara, Kasra, and I particularly am thinking of my son in Tehran, Sina.

There are people who do their work perfectly, according to provisions and rules. Among them, though, are some who take a step across the limits with their personal dedication, with their good instinct for their sphere of work. Rita Sachse-Toussaint, head of the Goethe-

Institut's liaison office in Tehran, is one of them. I am particularly indebted to Ms Toussaint, not only for this occasion, but also for her constructive commitment during her years of service in Tehran.

Professor Lehmann, members of the conferment committee:

You have honoured me with the Goethe Medal, an indescribable feeling. One sits 5,000 kilometres away and his accomplishments are valued by the best experts.

But today you have not only honoured me, as you perfectly worded – and I quote – for my “enthusiasm for the German language and for conveying German literature and culture to my homeland.”

Today, you have also given me my wages, the wages for my fears.

I thank you.